

How to write a research proposal

When applying for a research degree here with the University of Gloucestershire, you are required to write and submit a research proposal as an essential part of your application (DBA 1000 words/ PhD 2000 words). The following guidelines should be consulted by prospective research students in order to ensure that your proposal is not only clearly worded and structured, but also aims to leave the reader with a positive impression and inspires interest in your research.

Before you begin – general points to consider

- > Your proposal potentially marks the beginning of your research journey with the University of Gloucestershire and, as such, you are expected to spend time and effort in writing it. It is not a contract, however – if you are accepted onto the chosen programme, you will continue to develop your ideas and methodology in the early stages;
- > Your proposal must show an ability to think clearly, independently and critically, must demonstrate a potential contribution to existing knowledge (for doctoral research) and show that your research will be achievable within the allotted timeframe of your chosen course of study – it can help to include a timetable or Gantt chart showing how/when you intend to achieve your objectives;
- > It is your proposal, detailing a topic that you should be personally interested in – try to make your interest in the topic apparent to the reader;
- > Along with qualifications and references, your proposal will be used to determine whether or not you will be accepted onto the programme. Besides the quality of the proposal itself, it will be reviewed in terms of whether or not the topic fits with existing interest within the university, which in turn will inform potential supervision;
- > Proofread your proposal before submission, checking for typographical and grammatical errors. A well-written proposal free of spelling mistakes will show that time and care has been spent on it.

Guidelines on structure

A well-structured research proposal should normally contain the following:

1. Working title

– the title should contain key words that describe your intended research. Titles can change as research progresses, but at this stage it is necessary to state clearly and succinctly what the research is about.

2. Introduction

this should be a paragraph giving a brief overview of the general subject area, why you are interested in it, why you think your research is significant and giving a summary of what you intend to research.

3. Literature review

– use this section to demonstrate your awareness of the current literature in your field of research, giving examples of issues, debates and shortcomings within that literature. Briefly refer to key texts, displaying understanding of their relevance and specify the gap in current literature which your research intends to fill.

4. Research question(s)

– What are the specific aims and objectives of your research? Keep your research question(s) succinct, clear and concise. Avoid listing too many – a maximum of three research questions is usually enough for a research proposal at this stage.

5. Methodology

– use this section to explain how you intend to conduct your research. Specify what research methods or approaches you will utilize, justify why you have chosen them and what the limitations might be (if any).

6. Outcomes

– specify what your intended outcomes are. What are you aiming to achieve with your research?

7. Bibliography

– make a list of the key articles and texts you have referred to in preparing your research proposal. You may also list other relevant texts not directly drawn upon when writing your proposal, to show awareness of the scope of literature in your subject. Use a standard referencing style – accepted styles for the University of Gloucestershire can be found in our IHP-Download-Center.

Things to avoid

- > Avoid proposals that are too broad in scope and/or too vague – this will show that you have not thought enough about what you plan to research, how it fits into current literature or how you intend to achieve the research in the time available.
- > Avoid submitting a proposal for which there is no interest within the university – check our website for staff profiles and current research to ensure your topic fits within current academic interests.

Checklist before submission

Before submitting your proposal, make sure you can answer 'Yes' to the following questions:

- > Have I explained clearly what my research is about?
- > Have I shown why I want to research this topic and how it is significant?
- > Have I identified potential theoretical/practical contributions my research will make?
- > Have I identified the gap(s) in relevant literature?
- > Have I shown how I plan to carry out this research?
- > Have I explained what I hope to achieve?
- > Have I checked the university website to ensure my research can fit within, and contribute to, current academic research interests?
- > Have I proofread my proposal to check for typographical and grammatical errors?

Final thoughts

- > If accepted, your proposal will set the topic and direction of your research for the duration of the programme (for a part-time PhD this could be up to 7 years!), so it must be something that you are personally interested in. You will need self-motivation and commitment and, above all, you should be able to enjoy exploring your chosen topic.
- > Aim to leave the reader of your proposal excited, interested and wanting to know more. The reader should be left with a clear sense of purpose of the research, and should be able to understand what you hope to achieve without having to re-read the proposal.
- > You are not expected to know everything at this stage! But you are expected to spend time and thought on your proposal in order to clearly present your ideas for a research topic. The proposal is about you demonstrating that you are capable of the chosen level of study and have the potential to carry it through to a successful conclusion.

Master's level research vs. doctoral level research

There are significant differences between writing a research proposal for master's level study and writing one for doctoral level study. If you are applying for a Master of Research (MRes), Master of Philosophy (MPhil) or Master's by Research programme, your proposal does not necessarily need to show originality in terms of the intended outcome. You will need to show in your proposal, however, that you understand the scope and complexity of current knowledge in your field of research and can apply originality in its application to your research objectives. In contrast, doctoral research is judged on its ability to be a significant piece of work that advances knowledge through original research. It also incorporates within it the development of research as a career.

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